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Contact: Catherine Heitman  
(225) 287-7898; 978-7440 (c)  
cheitman@oyd.louisiana.gov

## **Transformation of Louisiana's Secure Juvenile Facilities begins with New Orleans-area Pilot**

***Youth introduce Governor Blanco, officials to new dormitory, family therapy and recreational spaces***

BRIDGE CITY, La. – The public got its first glimpse today into the future of Louisiana's secure juvenile facilities.

After months spent renovating an existing dormitory and retraining staff, the Office of Youth Development, the agency charged with reforming Louisiana's juvenile justice system, unveiled the first of many new living spaces and programs aimed at creating a more effective environment for rehabilitating the youth in its care.

Tours led by residents of Bridge City Center for Youth introduced Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, members of the news media, local officials and juvenile advocates to a dormitory room, family therapy room and recreational pavilion designed to make the youth more comfortable with their surroundings and successful in their therapy.

The youth also demonstrated group therapy techniques typical of the kind pioneered by Missouri's Division of Youth Services. Many states, including Louisiana, have embraced Missouri's system as a model for returning young men and women to a more productive life.

Governor Blanco has made reducing recidivism and building a more child-focused juvenile justice system a priority of her administration.

"We must use all of the resources from across state government to keep our youth out of the criminal justice system. We want to keep kids in our classrooms and out of trouble. But, for those in our care, we must give them the tools, the knowledge and the support to succeed once they return home," Blanco said.

Transforming Louisiana's secure facilities is a major part of the reform effort. The state partnered with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Mark Steward, former director of Missouri's Department of Youth Services, to develop and implement strategies for reforming secure care facilities. Some of the elements of the reform of secure facilities include:

- Smaller dormitories with 8-12 youth instead of 20-25, the typical size of most existing dormitories.
- Dorms staffed by YouthCARE workers rather than security guards. OYD has recruited and/or retrained 40 YouthCARE workers in a behavior management approach that emphasizes insights into adolescent growth and development.

- Dorms managed by a core team of staff assigned to one housing unit with the responsibility of treatment rather than correction.
- An emphasis on helping youth bond and work as a team to think through problems and improve decision making.

The eight BCCY teenagers participating in the pilot call their dormitory UJIMA, the name of one of the seven principles of Kwanzaa and an acronym for “United Journey Through Inspiration, Motivation and Achievement.” They began moving into the dorm in June and painted a mural on one of the walls of their dorm room. The mural, of a mother eagle feeding her young in their mountaintop nest, represents the youths’ preparation to soar toward their dreams.

Later this year, BCCY will begin construction of new dormitory buildings and continue the renovation of existing dorms. A second dormitory is scheduled to open in August with more to follow until all 70 youth at Bridge City are participating in the reform model. OYD’s two other facilities near Baton Rouge and Monroe are scheduled to follow. Jetson staff and recent recruits are beginning an intensive, eight-week YouthCARE training this week.

“Eventually we’ll have YouthCARE workers trained in this therapeutic approach at all of our facilities. We’re really trying to make a culture change so that rehabilitation becomes the prevailing mindset. We’ve seen it work in Missouri, and we know it’s working at Bridge City,” OYD Deputy Secretary Simon Gonsoulin said.

Among the results are a safer environment. In the month that they’ve been together the eight UJIMA residents have seen a reduction in fights, a factor that BCCY officials attribute to the group dynamics in the dormitory.

In addition to dormitories and treatment services, BCCY is expanding its educational opportunities. This coming school year the facility will begin offering vocational programs that will allow youth to become certified in various skills areas. Among those being considered are welding, culinary arts, horticulture and golf course maintenance.

“Bridge City is a safe haven for many youth who need help getting their lives together. We want to do more to make the experience an even more positive and productive one for all of them,” BCCY Director John Anderson said.

Continued improvements of secure facilities will be part of the state’s juvenile justice reform plan that is set for release this fall. OYD is holding a series of 11 regional meetings over the next few months with interested community members around the state to gather input on the five-year reform plan.

Key parts of the plan will involve increasing services at the regional level to keep young people closer to home. Other elements will include safety, family involvement, development of a seamless continuum of care, community involvement and partnership and data-driven outcomes.

Louisiana’s juvenile justice reform effort gained momentum two years ago when the Legislature passed the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2003. Last year, in one of her first actions as governor, Blanco made juvenile justice reform a top priority of her administration by ordering the separation of the Office of Youth Development from the Department of Public Safety and Corrections. This change underscored the new emphasis of juvenile justice in Louisiana from corrections to one centered on the treatment and rehabilitation of youth.

“There have been about 20 states that visited Missouri in the last two years to collect information about the system and the strategies behind its success. While many asked for information, none had the same key ingredients you find in Louisiana, namely the support from

the top -- from the Governor's office to the Legislature and judiciary. It takes a lot of commitment and effort to evolve from a correctional to a therapeutic environment. Louisiana made critical changes and the pilot is on the way. I'd say it's accomplished more than any other state in the country," said Steward, who also serves as president of the National Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators.

Kathleen Feely, Managing director of the Casey Strategic Consulting Group, said, "The comprehensive juvenile justice reform being undertaken by Louisiana is terribly complicated and almost unprecedented in the country. The state has moved with very deliberate speed and resolve to re-tool, train and re-train staff in state of the art methods for helping young people change and develop into productive adults. Governor Blanco is to be congratulated for her absolute determination to turn this system around. OYD Deputy Secretary Gonsoulin has done a terrific job leading this complex effort. Today is a great day for the young people of Louisiana."

Recently OYD announced the hiring of a former middle school principal for the new position of family ombudsman, which is designed to increase family engagement in youngsters' rehabilitation and treatment. OYD is developing orientation videos and informational programs describing family involvement opportunities, educational programs, treatment services and other elements of the system that can help youth turn their lives around.

Louisiana's commitment to juvenile justice reform has attracted national attention. Last month the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation joined the Casey Foundation in committing resources to assist Louisiana in improving its system. MacArthur officials identified Louisiana as one of three states in its Models for Change program and announced up to \$7.5 million over the next five years to help accelerate the reforms.

The Louisiana Office of Youth Development serves about 5,000 youth in community-based programs, parole and probation programs and at secure care facilities including Bridge City, Jetson Center for Youth near Baton Rouge and Swanson Center for Youth in Monroe.

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